



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Paul W. Jones
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 10, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Before proceeding to the topic of the day, we would like to congratulate Mr. Haraszti for the recognition he recently received from the United States government. In late February, President Bush identified Mr. Haraszti as one of twenty-one "Champions of Freedom"--a symbol of the deep appreciation the United States has for his life-long contribution to the cause of human rights.

It is always a pleasure to welcome Mr. Haraszti back to the Permanent Council and thank him both for his comprehensive report and for the work done by his office during the past quarter.

We are pleased that Mr. Haraszti was finally able to make his long-planned visit to Belarus, where he met with the full spectrum of media stakeholders.

The media situation in Belarus is bleak. This is borne out by the official statistics provided by Belarusian authorities. Belarus' restrictive media legislation, draconian libel and insult laws, overwhelming dominance of one-sided state media, and administrative harassment and discrimination against the independent press demonstrate, once again, the Belarusian Government's blatant disregard for its OSCE commitments.

The United States is particularly disturbed by the use of libel laws to imprison democratic activists. The cases of Valery Levonevski and Alexander Vasilyev demonstrate how the Government of Belarus uses such laws to stifle dissent.

In the 1999 Charter for European Security, the Belarusian Government affirmed "the importance of independent media and the free flow of information as well as the public's access to information." It further committed itself to "take all necessary steps to ensure the basic conditions for free and independent media and unimpeded trans-border and intra-State flow of information."

The statistics provided by Belarus indicate that the trend is in the opposite direction, with the number of newspaper suspensions having dramatically increased in 2003 and 2004.

We appreciate Mr. Haraszti's offer to work closely with the Government of Belarus to help it come into compliance with its OSCE commitments. Now that he has had the opportunity to assess the situation first-hand, we ask that Mr. Haraszti keep the Permanent Council informed of his efforts to follow up on his visit and on the responses of the Belarusian Government.

Mr. Chairman, it is unfortunate that the authorities in Transnistria "discouraged" Mr. Haraszti from visiting the region. We remember Mr. Haraszti's fruitful visit to Chisinau last October and regret that the Transnistrian authorities refused to benefit from this opportunity.

We share Mr. Haraszti's assessment that independent media in Transnistria face a very difficult situation because of the restrictive practices imposed by the leadership in Tiraspol.

The United States joins Mr. Haraszti in urging the local authorities in the Transnistria region to stop the discriminatory policy of registering newspapers and to take a decisive step towards media pluralism by ensuring objective, balanced news coverage by media outlets under control of the Tiraspol authorities and by ensuring that media oversight is conducted objectively by an independent entity.

We also support Mr. Haraszti's recommendation that the existing media sources in the region devote a greater amount of their broadcasting time and print space to presenting the range of differing political views and groupings that exist in the region.

We applaud the impressive work that Mr. Haraszti and his office have put into creating a comprehensive database on libel and defamation practices in the OSCE region. Our delegation has supported this project since its beginning. The matrix promises to be an extremely useful point of reference for participating States, as well as for media advocacy groups, academics and members of the public interested in the issues of libel and defamation as they relate to freedom of the media and freedom of expression. We urge OSCE participating States to devote more effort to ensuring adherence to OSCE media freedom commitments throughout the OSCE region.

Mr. Chairman, despite the commitments that we have all made to promote media freedom and independence, journalists continued to be harassed, arrested and killed. Fortunately, there appears to be progress in the Gongadze case in Ukraine and the Klebnikov case in Russia.

We are deeply saddened however by the killing of Elmar Huseynov. His death is a great loss to the ongoing development of democracy and press freedom in Azerbaijan -- and his killing provides a chilling example of the most extreme and unacceptable form of censorship. We note that the Azerbaijani Government has strongly condemned the killing and we urge the authorities in Baku to investigate his murder thoroughly and to bring the killers to justice.

The United States regrets the Government of Kazakhstan's decision to file a suit against the owner of the leading opposition newspaper "Respublika," that could result in the paper's closure. This move belies Kazakhstan's commitment to freedom of speech and diversity of views in the media and we urge the Government to reconsider its decision.

Once again, we would like to thank Mr. Haraszti and his staff for their committed work on Freedom of the Media issues.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.